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Commentary on
torpedo run, Battle of
Surigao Strait by LT
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0334

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TORPEDO RUN - SURIGAO STRAIT

It was all a nightmare - fantastic, absolutely screwy.

Here in the Jap-held Philippines shortly after 2 A.M. on the fateful night of 25 October were we five Philadelphians -- a former truck driver for the American Railway Express at 15th & Market Sts., a toolkeeper at the Frankford Arsenal, a star pitcher for the Brewerytown A.A., an oiler in the Philadelphia-Camden ferries, and your reporter.

The night itself was worth writing home about, more than 11,000 miles away. It was dark and strangely forbidding. Big blotches of heat lightning flashed in rapid succession through clouds as vast as mountain ranges. Each flash outlined the black shapes of mountainous islands, Jap sentinels bearing down on us in Leyte Gulf. Our ship lazed back and forth on a patrol line at the northern end of Surigao Strait. The phosphorescent water swashed along her sides with a jewelled quality less bright than usual.

We home town boys were tired. It had been one invasion on top of another for weeks, for months on end, strike after strike, with guns roaring. All this in the backwaters of the world. In our crowded, grassy-hulled man-o-war the words "liberty" and "rest and recreation" brought out on us sinister smiles only.

Front-Line Destroyer

Ours was a United States destroyer (McGOWAN DD678), a 2100-tonner, a flush-decker, lovely-to-look-at and deadly, sporting a bizarre black-and-gray striped camouflage. Called on for all things was this front-line destroyer of the U.S. Pacific Fleet - beach bombardment, fighter-plane direction, fleet and convoy screening, anti-submarine patrol, rescues, and general errands such as the recovery of bodies. Our "can" never "swung around the hook" for long. She was always either underway or madly preparing to get underway.

For five days, after landing General MacArthur's men on Leyte Island, we had been nudging mines, ducking "Tonys", "Oscars", or you-name-it Jap fighter planes crazily trying to foul themselves in our boat davits - and we had been standing all-night "GQ's".

It was during one of those General Quarters sessions the PT boats in the Mindanao Sea at the other end of the strait interrupted the eerie stillness. They had engaged the whole Jap battle fleet, they screamed, or so it seemed! The fleet was on course north heading for the strait and our landing beaches. We were the next line of defense!

"Dream Situation!"

At that moment, about one mile to the northward of our patrol line, Rear Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf paced the bridge deck of his venerable cruiser. He flew his flag on the main battle line with the old battleships, the cruisers and their screening destroyers. What the PT boats announced electrified him, of course, and also made him a profoundly happy man. It placed him in a "dream situation", he said. The Jap hosts were a luscious prize. "Suckers!" he hissed.

The Nips came on at about 18 knots, conserving fuel apparently for a proposed getaway at dawn. They stood into Surigao Strait itself, sweeping the water with searchlight and starshell, precautions against the viscous attacks of our fanatical torpedo boats.

Over one of our pilot house voice transmitters a torpedo boat skipper could be heard hysterically counting off a description of the big brutes steaming into the strait. Suddenly he was silenced forever in a pin-pointed concentration of enemy fire by searchlight.

"Skunks in our Scope"

Our radars had picked up the "skunks"; U.S. Naval term for unfriendly and suspicious surface contacts. Operators saw what looked like one heavy cruiser followed by two battleships, the modernized, grotesque old Yamashiro and Fuso probably, plus four-to-five destroyers. The heavy ships were in rough column flanked by the destroyers for a total, within our scope, of seven-to-eight enemy men-o'-war. More were on their way, twice as many more.

On they come up the slot, never faltering, never turning. It was horrible to watch. We five Philadelphians and recent civilians had a sense of foreboding, of coming disaster. The lunatic Japs were only about 14 miles away now. A clash was inevitable. It was never like this in the Philadelphia-Camden ferry run! It was unreal; it was screwy.

From Jesse Oldendorf: "...DesRon 54 (Destroyer Squadron 54) will make torpedo attack..."

"Ah!" our Old Man muttered.

We were junior can in DesRon 54. DesRon 56 was to follow in a second attack, making for a considerable number of destroyers slipping "fish" into the "sucker" Japs under cover of night. There had been no destroyer action of comparable size to that now called for in all the long history of World War II.

Aboard ship the news spread like wildfire.

"Where're we going?"

"Out to sink the Jap Navy!"

All hands were aware few destroyers returned whole, if at all, from torpedo runs on a dreadnought force. They knew that much naval history.

All hands knew, too, to be "damaged" might for many of them be as fatal as for the ship to be "lost" - mangled bodies, in either case. Destroyer men, they had been next door to that sort of thing more than once. But this was a "lucky ship". They banked on that.

One of Desron 54's skippers spoke ominously to his crew over the loud-speaker system and wished them well. He said later he had fully expected the worst. He, too, was a student of naval history.

Our Captain, Commander William Ruffin Cox, USN, of Tarboro, N.C., a big, athletic, sagacious man, a gentlemen in the best naval sense, pointed out the friendly and unfriendly islands in case we should need to know.

Suddenly, quietly he had maneuvered us into a position astern the senior destroyer of the squadron. DD's were to rush down the eastern and down the western sides of the strait in a two-pronged attack. We were to race in one astern the other and fire our torpedoes in succession.

Oldendorf's battleships and cruisers would swing into battle line in a rough semi-circle just north of the northern entrance to Surigao Strait.

The Old Man

The Old Man, progeny of a long line of Southern clergymen, gave orders in a stoical manner. He looked ascetic out there on the open bridge staring into the dramatic night. His strong voice betrayed no emotion other than a trace stricter control. Everyone had the deepest confidence in "Captain Cox".

If anyone can get us out of it, he can, was remark heard throughout the ship that night.

"All engines ahead flank," he called.

We were away, rushing down Surigao Strait to our fateful rendezvous, watching the range to the foe grow narrower by the second. Nine miles. Seven. Five. The phosphorescent water split wide with sparkling foam; our wake, boiling higher and higher, seemed to cascade onto the fantail. Intermittently snorting thrilling blasts of steam and shuddering with the power of 60,000 horses, we raced down the slot under a turbulent sky. This was classical destroyer action, right out of the class room, or Hollywood.

Awful Minutes

During those awful minutes the quartermaster's hands gripped the steering wheel far down and spun it around this way and that, men with phones clamped to their heads listened sharply, torpedo-men glued themselves to their directors (one boy's knees gave way) and the gunners for nothing better to do waved their guns.

Down below in the roaring engine spaces they were so busy with four boilers lit off, so busy shifting over to the high pressure turbine, so busy checking bearings and feed pumps, reading thermometers and a wilderness of dials they had no time at all for reflection. But they, too, had said a prayer.

As busy as the engineers were, the men packed into the seething, throbbing little Combat Information Center, a madhouse of rasping radios and voice transmitters. Here were the all-important radar operators, the plotters sweating over the enemies "track" pencilled on an illuminated table, emergency repair men, "talkers" connected to the torpedo officer on the bridge; to the gunnery officers on the gun director atop the bridge.

The Exec

In "CIC", our nerve center, the enthusiastic, able executive officer, Lt. P.L. Reed, Jr. USNR, of Dedham, Mass., smoked countless cigarettes, wore a headset, and was in direct communication with the Captain, who also wore a headset on the open bridge. The "Exec" was expertly assisted by a CIC-wise youngster, Lt.(jg) I.C. Sheldon, 23, USNR, of Saunderstown, R.I. In the radio shack they went on with their message copying, the phonograph droning, "Somebody Else is Taking My Place."

The ammunition handling room crews, the repair parties and the pharmacist's mates had to sit it out and wait for the worst, which they fully expected. Many of these people, excepting the pharmacist's mates, who as a group - as well they might have been - seemed the most taken aback, broke out decks of cards and dealt rounds of gin rummy. Others slept! Most were sightless behind tender steel bulkheads. Anyone stepping outside for sight-seeing purposes was denounced for a bloody fool. Occasionally a boy with a long face stuck his head out of a lower handling room manhole in the bowels of the ship and had to be persuaded to "dog" that hatch!

Suddenly over a quiet circuit a talker sang out: "What would you give to be at the bar in Penn Station now?"

"One dime, one whole dime!"

In a dimly-lit, foul-aired, hot little compartment (all ventilation was cut out), a faithful chief storekeeper, member of a repair party, shifted about for a seat on a hatch cover. The throbbing vibrations of the ship made all seats uncomfortable there. The Chief was muttering to himself.

By rights he shouldn't have been along. The chief had been "in excess of complement" a long time now, but for some inscrutable reason transfer orders to "new construction" had been forever coming through. The old work-horse said he wished he were on Market Street in San Francisco, the best place he could think of. Never had he felt more in excess of complement than at that particular moment.

"This Is It!"

Nine miles down the slot our ship was swept by enemy searchlight. We were racing in to let go our "fish", straining at terrific speed (at approximately the speed limit in Fairmont Park). The chief engineer, Ensign J.B. Siquelfield, 28, USN, of Geneva, Ala., had to scream to be heard at all above the roaring engines.

A blueish light shot through the darkness in a long arc, swept off the leading destroyer and steadied on our black-and-gray outline for 45 seconds, possibly.

"This is it!" proclaimed a young quartermaster on the bridge the son of a Gloucester fisherman.

From the destroyer ahead dull-red flashes...At moment-long intervals torpedoes slipped from tubes on the midships superstructure and in long dives plunged into the water until all, a full salvo, had been fired.

The big "fish", slim, enormously costly mechanisms, sped away on whirling steel fins to bring death and destruction to who-knows-how-many hundreds of Japanese officers and men.

Home and Jesse Oldendorf

The senior destroyer, unburdened of her "fish", wheeled hard to port, came out on a wildly zig-zagging course and at top speed reached for home and Jesse Oldendorf - palls of oil-black funnel smoke pouring thick from her.

We were next; it was our turn.

"Fire full salvo," Captain Cox called.

Lieutenant (jg) BM. Adams, 24, of Phoenix, Arizona, had been glued to the telescope of the torpedo director some 30 minutes now. Adams, the torpedo officer, was ready.

Like clockwork, his "fish" swished from their polished lairs, dove into the black water and streaked away - express cargoes of TNT for Yamashiro and Fuso.

"Any torpedoes left?"

"None."

"Torpedoes away!" shrieked our high-keyed, very efficient communication officer, Lt. E.A. Woody, 25, a former Vanderbilt pre-med student, of Santa Fe, Tennessee.

We were making our southern turn when the Japs opened fire. Starshells - as many as eight at one time - burst overhead. Their yellow radiance made a high-noon of our turgid turn. Slowly, slowly, like golden fire balls, they fell, leaving long smoky trails in the sky. One fell into our after stack, we thought.

"Make smoke, make smoke!" the Old Man shouted.

The lad on the engine order telegraph misunderstood the command to shriek, "Make speed, make speed!"

Already oil-black smoke was pouring from our stacks, sooting the decks and making minstrels of men topside.

Shells Travelling Over

Swept by sudden fire, shells plummeted into the water ahead, abeam and astern of us. Others whistled, whined overhead.

To the Brewerytown, A.A. ace, Earl Botson, 22, Slc, gun pointer today, shells travelling over the fo'c'stle sounded like "somebody turned off a vacuum cleaner."

The sightless men in CIC felt their tender bulkhead give a little, so they said.

It was secondary battery stuff, "four-point-seven" and possibly some "six-inch." All of it missed. The Nips had been caught by surprise, apparently, with beach bombardment ammunition up in the hoists of their main batteries. Their main batteries consisted, very likely, of twelve 14" guns to each battlewagon. Then there was the heavy cruiser plus all those cans, don't forget. We ourselves WERE a lucky ship!

A pale crimson glow showed along the horizon edge where the Japs were.

"Good, good!" the Old Man said.

The Japs were still burning at dawn. Admiral Oldendorf's battlewagons had made doubly sure of that. The revengeful, old "BB's" had delivered the haymaker. All we did was slow the "suckers" down.

"Scardest I Ever Was"

Where were we five Philadelphians and recent civilians? We were there alright. Botson, whose home is at 2916 W. Flora St., was out there in Gun Two.

"Guess that's the scardest I ever was in my life," he says, seriously. "Everyone in my mount prayed. You could see them bow their heads. One fellow said he never prayed much before, but he read a Testament that night."

Botson had opened a gun mount hatch to find a Jap searchlight full in his face. Just the same, he jumped out on the deck and stood there; without one square inch of protection, watching for torpedo wakes, as per instruction.

"I was darned scared wondering where the next shell would go," he went on. "I was the scardest when the starshells were overhead, waiting for something to come any minute."

In the last war, the gun-pointer's father, Bernard Botson, was a Lieutenant-up-from-the-ranks serving in cruisers. Earl has one ambition - to return to the PTC repair shop on Broad St. & Olney Ave. He likes the mechanical end of gunnery.

Four Years of War

Chief Yeoman Harold E. Thacker, 26, USNR, of 4401 Disston St., Tacony, is the boy who wants to go back to truck driving for the American Railway Express at 15th & Market Sts., and he's not kidding a little bit.

This South Philadelphia High School product (his father was a cop of long standing at 25th & Dickinson Sts.) has had four solid years wartime sea duty, in the amphibious forces and in destroyers. What's more, he's going to be a father for the first time in December.

Any yeoman on the beach like to trade billets with Thacker? He's all ears and palpitating anticipation. The chief was torpedoed outside Gibraltar, participated in the invasion of Casablanca, in North Atlantic submarine actions, five Pacific invasions, and has undergone some really rugged torpedo plane attacks, in addition to this big-time destroyer run down Surigao Strait.

He feels he'd like to settle down in the Federal Building for a stretch; in fact, that's what he dreams about when he has happy dreams. Chief Thacker was Captain Cox's talker on the open bridge.

From the Arsenal

Michael Vardaro, 32, MM1c, USNR, of 925 W. Sterner St., has spent nearly seven years in the Navy, four of them as a regular. He has worked in sub chasers, tugs, a yard freighter, destroyers ("four-piper" and otherwise), and in the aircraft carrier, Yorktown. His father, John Vardaro, is a barber. Mike is the one who can't wait to get back to toolkeeping at the Frankfort Arsenal. He said his prayers in the after engine room.

Pacific Ferry - Never

A. R. Ranken, 19, MM2c, USN, doesn't really belong to our gang. He comes from 35 Spruce Ave., Maple Shade, over by Camden, N. J. He's the lad who, when his hitch is up next year thinks he might go around and see the Philadelphia-Camden ferry boat people about having his old job back. If they give him a ferry he won't come out here in it, believe us. Ranken, a fat boy, slept soundly throughout the Battle of Surigao Strait. He was a member of a repair party.

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T H E E N D

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